

Vortex

SCIENCE FICTION

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COMPLETE STORIES

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Vortex

SCIENCE FICTION

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CHESTER WHITEHORN, Editor

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One Man War

By L. MAJOR REYNOLDS

This time
the danged Marshies
didn't have a chance

GIL Harmon settled himself in the pilot's seat, and snugged the webs around him firmly. He touched the starter switch, and grinned wolfishly as his ears caught the even purr of the atomic motors. He let them idle while he adjusted his ear phones, and made certain his throat mike was in position. Not that it would do much good, he reflected. This was strictly a one man war. His war.

He had a bit of trouble stuffing his long grizzled hair under the tight fitting cap, but he finally made it, and buckled the chin strap. His space suit, hanging on the wall was next, and he checked all the dials

carefully, and made sure the oxygen gauge was pressed against the full pin.

The control panel was next. He activated each needle in line, and grinned again as everything showed in perfect order.

"Ain't no dirty Marshie gonna catch old Gil nappin!" he muttered.

The vision plate was his next consideration. He polished an almost invisible smudge from its surface, and snapped the switch several times to make sure it was working properly.

He looked for a long time at the yellow plastic handle on the board just before him, and caressed it with

fingers that trembled from sheer anticipation. This was his own creation. An atomic ray that could sweep anything opposing it into instant annihilation. The ray which would bring peace once more to an embattled Earth, and blow its conquerors back to their own dry world.

He touched a stud at the side of the board, and smiled as another of his inventions went into action.

This one was a shimmering haze which surrounded his craft with a peculiar silver luster that would turn aside any weapon the enemy decided to use. He turned on the grin again.

"Let the damned Marshies try their ether rays against that," he crowed. "This time'll be different!" He glanced at the thermostat, saw

the needle at the correct temperature, and stepped on the throttle.

There was a muffled snarl of power, and the stubby craft lifted easily from the ground and shot upward in a swift climb.

It was only moments until Gil saw a sight that had been denied him for too long. As he left the atmosphere, the stars blazed their light against the backdrop of black space. He breathed a sigh which came clear from the bottom, and relaxed against the padded seat, scanning the vision plate for some sign of movement. For a long moment his faded blue eyes widened under their shaggy brows as he carefully conned his immediate surroundings, then they slit-
ted as he caught a glimpse of some-



thing just at the remote edge of the plate. He leaned forward, watching intently.

He hadn't been mistaken. It was a Martian battleship, sweeping around in a full curve, scouting out the Earth below. Gil's mouth set in a grim line as he reached for the yellow plastic ball.

He deliberately allowed his craft to cross the battleship's path where it was impossible for him to be overlooked. He was expecting action, and action he got.

The enemy guns raved out in a flaming flood of fury completely obscuring his ship in a blanket of flame. For a moment his eyes shot toward the temperature control, then his grin widened. The blast hadn't even touched him!

He let the Martian cut loose with another broadside before he reached again almost negligently for the plastic ball and aimed it at the terrifying bulk before him.

IT was only a pale yellow flash that shone for an instant from the nose of his craft, but in that instant, space before him was clear. There wasn't even a small scrap of the uncounted tons of metal that had composed the battleship.

Gil settled himself more firmly in his seat, and started on the prow.

He was almost bored with the proceedings before he had destroyed the last of the seven ships whose duty was to guard the Earth, but he finished up the job neatly.

"Seven down and the rest to go!" he gloated. "Here I come, you dirty sons! This time it'll be different!"

He was nearly halfway to Mars before he caught sight of his prey in the plate. He had to turn his finder thirty degrees before he could cover the immense fleet which hung in space. This time there was no hesitation. He sent his ship into the center of the gathering, and posed himself arrogantly at a full stop.

The vision plate was a solid mass of flame instantly, as the Martians turned on their fire power. Gil didn't even condescend to look at the thermostat, but relaxed, and let them do their worst. He even whistled a little tune between the snags that once were his teeth.

The blast of fire ceased, and Gil sat quietly for almost a minute before he made his move.

An enormous troop carrier was directly in front of him, and he erased it with one sweep of his hand. He sneered as the blasts enveloped his craft again, and waited until they stopped.

He had destroyed almost a quarter of the immense fleet, when he suddenly decided to get playful.

He carved a gigantic E on the side of one battleship with a thinned out ray, and saw its contents spew into space with bodies and machinery well mixed. One after another went the same way, until finally, if they could have been lined up, they would have spelled EARTH. Tiring of that,

he drilled one mighty cruiser from stem to stern, and shot his craft through the improvised tunnel. He carved another giant ship into neat slices, all the while howling with glee, and bluing the atmosphere of his own craft with all the unprintable names his memory could produce.

One of the battleships suddenly broke away and headed full speed for the red disk that was Mars. Gil let it reach velocity, then carved the steering tubes away and let it shoot onward into outer space.

"G'wan out and starve to death!" he snarled. "At that it's too damned good for ya!"

For a long time he played with the fleet as a cat worries a mouse. Several times he let some of them almost get away to a fancied security before blasting them into atoms. Finally, he realized he had wasted too much time. He set his control on the plastic ball to wide coverage, and the next instant there was no sign of the mighty fleet that had been there a second before.

The ever present grin widened still more as he set a course for the red dot that was Mars, and poured on the coal.

"I won't leave anybody alive on the blasted planet!" he snarled as he raced through the blackness. "Those Marshies've had this comin' for a long time, an' old Gil's the guy that can take care of 'em! I'm just as good a pilot as I ever was!"

Space was clear with the excep-

tion of several gigantic meteors, but they disappeared in one flash from a perfectly aimed ray, and Gil sped on, burning with vengeance.

He was coming down, just slackening speed, when from some where he heard something that made the universe almost blot out before his eyes. Stubbornly he blocked whatever it was from his mind, and again the rosy world shone out clearly before him. There was, deep in his brain one tiny regret that he had wasted too much time in destroying the fleet, but there was a world still to destroy.

His first target was the mighty ship building works which lay at the junction of the two main canals. He didn't spare a moment as he shot downward. His hand was steady on the plastic ball, and a fan of golden death raged ahead of him.

There was nothing but a mile deep cavity when he swung his craft upward again. Nowhere could there be seen any sign of the gigantic installation that had been there one brief moment before. Gil grunted his satisfaction.

He hung in the air, a few miles above the surface and plotted his next move.

A glimpse of white to the north attracted him, and the next instant he was poised above the ice cap, his anti-gravitators holding him steady, as the yellow ray bored downward.

Vapor came first, then steam, then superheated steam that at last broke up into its component parts and once more became a gas which mingled with the atmosphere, never again to be released.

After the ice cap was nothing but bare rock, he turned his attention to the cities. One after another he wiped out, and soon there were none left except for small villages which he had to hunt out and destroy.

Several times a ship rose from the surface to do battle, but Gil was in a hurry. He didn't even give them time to reach fighting height, but blasted them as soon as he saw them.

Toward the south pole, he came suddenly upon a training center, and one flash of the ray blotted out thousands of marching soldiers.

Now, there was only one thing left to do. He had to go out a few hundred miles, and burn every shred of atmosphere from the planet. Even if somewhere, some one was left alive, they could never live to be a threat to Earth if they had no air to breathe.

He was settling himself for the final blast, when the sound came again.

The universe exploded in a mad kaleidoscope of color and Gil fought to keep the planet below him in focus. It faded out, and he brought it back by sheer will power. Finally it steadied, and he reached again for

the plastic knob which controlled the golden death.

His fingers never reached it. There was a sudden blast of sound:

"GRA-A-A-MPS!"

Gil Harmon dropped his reaching hand and shook his head. Slowly he unfastened the chin strap of his helmet and pulled it off. He looked around him as he opened the webbing belt, and two big tears rolled down his wrinkled cheeks as he saw the gaping holes in the sides of the ship, and the rusty control panel before him. His fingers reached again for the plastic ball, and he carressed it for a moment. Once again it was just the light control for the board, and the stud at the side of the board was just the emergency alarm. He didn't even look up when the voice of his grandson cut at him from the doorway which had no door.

"So there you are, you silly old goat! Maw said you'd be here actin' like you was a pilot. Sometimes I think you're tetched in the head, Gramps. There ain't no more war, an' you know it. Maw says to tell you that you'd better stir your stumps and get back to the clearin'. We got crops to get in, an' if the Marshie overseers show up an' we ain't got nuthin' planted, they'll burn us sure as shootin' Stir your stumps, you crazy old coot, we got work to do!"

— L. MAJOR REYNOLDS